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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study relates the differences reported by student teachers as they experienced teaching in a culturally diverse elementary school that contained a large population of minority students and compared that placement with a rural school that had few or no minority students. The methodology involved preplacement interviews, journals, written comparisons, and postplacement interviews with 20 student teachers in South Central Pennsylvania. Tables I through IV contain the major findings of the study and relate: (1) the preplacement expectations of the student teachers; (2) the postplacement reactions; and (3) the differences between the school that contained the large minority population and the school that contained few or no minority students. Student teachers reported that there was a lack of praise of students in the minority school, and that black students tended to be ambivalent toward academic efforts and success, findings that point to a need for more praise, not less. The comparisons made by these student teachers indicate the necessity of helping teachers develop cultural awareness. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

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Minority and Traditional Elementary Students:

A Comparison Study

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Abstract

This ethnographic study relates the differences reported by student teachers as they experienced teaching in a culturally diverse elementary school that contained a large population of minority students and compared that placement with a school that had little or no minority students. The methodology involved pre-placement interviews, journals, written comparisons, and post-placement interviews. Tables I-IV contain the major findings of the study and relate: (1) The pre-placemnet expectations of the student teachers; (2) The post-placement reactions; and (3) The differences between the school that contained the large minority population with a school that contained little or no minority students.

MINORITY AND TRADITIONAL ELEMENTARY STUDENTS: A COMPARISON STUDY

INTRODUCTION

A component that needs to be addressed by teacher education programs is how to gain experiences that will give teachers a better understanding of multicultural school populations. This approach to cross-cultural experience is not unique or new. A comparison study of cultural differences between student teaching experiences in Minnesota and South Texas related the teachers' attitudes about the cross-cultural experiences (Cooper, Beare, and Thorman, 1990). The Holmes Group (1990) also expressed the need for teachers to be aware of the cultural diversity they will face in the classroom.

There have also been case studies (Fuller & Ahler, 1987), and ecological studies (Hamilton, 1983) on the impact of multicultural education on teacher practices. The article by Lisa D. Delpit (1992), "Education in a Multicultural Society: Our Future's Great Challenge" illustrates the "clash between school culture and home culture" (p. 238), as an area that teachers must have an awareness of in order to perform their jobs adequately.

The studies and articles on multicultural experiences of student teachers and teachers have given insights into gender, race, and class (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Grossman, 1991; James, 1991; Mitchell, 1987;). The author recognized a need to have a

picture of what student teachers perceive as differences between schools that have a large population of minority students and to compare this experience with students from schools that have little or no minority students. A pre-entry questionnaire and interview of the student teachers was used to ascertain what were their expectations before they encountered the minority experience. One area of the post-placement questionnaire expanded on this area of expectations and focused on the reality that they found in the setting. Another area of interest was what similarities and differences were found by student teachers as they encounter a culturally diverse school as compared to schools where cultural diversity was not present.

METHODOLOGY

With the interest in gathering field-based data from student teachers before, during, and after their placement in schools in South Central Pennsylvania, a methodology for collecting relevant data was planned. The student teachers involved in the study were interviewed prior to student teaching with four target areas being addressed: (1) The student teacher would be willing to spend half of the assignment (eight weeks) in a culturally diverse school; (2) Information would be collected on the expectations they had prior to entering into the schools; (3) They would be required to keep a log of their experiences and

share these findings at the end of the student teaching experience; and (4) A post interview would be conducted.

The data was collected over a one-year period of time (two semesters) with twenty student teachers participating. No minority student teacher was involved in the study. The multicultural schools were selected from a relatively large school (7,831 students) in South Central Pennsylvania that has a large population of minority students and would represent a multicultural setting. The second school was used as the control and was representative of rural Pennsylvania with little or no minority students.

The results of the interviews and questionnaire were tabulated to reach the major conclusions of the inquiry. The data gathered was compiled under the two major areas of the inquiry: (1) What did the student teacher expect to encounter in the multicultural school and what did they actually find; (2) How did the culturally diverse school differ (or was the same) as the non-culturally diverse school?

RESULTS

Table I

Pre-Placement Expectations
a. Uncertain about what to expect b. Discipline problems - "school to be rougher" c. Students not accepting of them d. Students would be low academically

Table II

Post-Placement Reactions
a. Many students had severe problems - emotional, learning, educational b. Lack of family support c. Students were accepting of the student teacher d. Discipline was not a problem

Differences between Assignment Schools

Table III -

Minority Schools - Findings
a. Home environment of children unsettled b. Students below grade level c. Strict discipline - students rarely rewarded d. Students very "street wise" e. Students need for structure and security f. Low self-esteem g. Large number on free or reduced lunch

Table IV

Non-Minority Schools - Findings
a. Students more secure in their lives b. Students did not need much from teachers c. Few home problems - parent support

As in most ethnographic studies, the small number of participants is counterbalanced by the depth of the inquiry. The results were not to be a far reaching analysis of the whole issue of multicultrualism in the public schools, but rather to give a picture of what the participants reported and to learn and apply the results to other situations.

The pre-assignment reactions of the student teachers are reported in Table I. The student teachers did recognize that they entered the minority experience with some negative bias as to that they would expect to find. In general the student teachers related that they expected to be exposed to a "rough time" in the minority school.

Table II represents the post-placement reactions and contain two different findings: (1) As was expected there the student teachers encountered students with problems, many of which seemed to be due to the lack of family support; (2) What was not expected was the student teachers did not encounter serious discipline problems, and to their amazement were readily accepted by the students. The student teachers were looked to for support and security that would be expected to come from the family. It should be noted that although discipline was not expressed as a problem, the procedures for dealing with discipline were rigid control that had been established by the cooperating teachers, in which little student praise was used.

The second area of the study, as related in Tables III and IV, is a comparison of the multicultural schools and the non-

multicultural schools that were used as the basis for comparison. The areas that emerged from the multicultural schools were: (1) Poor home situation; (2) Students functioning below grade level; (3) Low self esteem; and (4) Low social economic status. The results of the comparison seem to indicate the need for skilled teachers to be placed in multicultural schools who are equipped to deal with the multitude of problems that seems to be unique to cultural diverse school settings.

The profile that emerges concerning students from the multicultural schools is one that portrays them as "street-wise kids" in need of understanding and praise instead of strict discipline from teachers. Though somewhat surprising, this position strengthens the need for teachers to capitalize on the need for structure and security for students and expand the use of praise to achieve academic excellence.

The picture that emerged from the comparisons with the non-multicultural schools is not surprising. The student teachers recognized that the students responded to and were used to praise. They also reported the presence of strong family structures that were willing to support their children. The students in these schools did not seem to need or rely on the teacher for support, instead the student teachers related that the students did not seem to need them for much of anything.

DISCUSSION

The comparison provided by the student teachers as they experienced two diverse schools gives another facet that should help teachers establish their position of having "... a central role in the positive development of our culturally pluralistic society" (Commission on Multicultural Education, 1973, p. 264).

According to Herbert Grossman (1991) Euro-American students are praised more than African-American students. This position of lack of praise in the minority schools was evident as reported by the student teachers, and should be a major area that teaching preparation institutions need to address. This coupled with the assertion that black students are ambivalent toward academic efforts and success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), point to a need for more praise not less.

The parent involvement or lack there of can also play a large part in the success of students. Contemporary research has stressed the need for parent involvement if students are to succeed (Bloom, 1985; Comer, 1984; Griffore & Boyer, 1986; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982; and Zinn, 1989).

Schools need to look for ways to involve the community in appropriate ways so that students can benefit and teachers keep a sense of the values of the larger community that they serve. As Michell (1991) relates, the development of multicultural sensitive teachers is the goal and needs to be addressed by teacher preparation institutions. As stated by the Commission

on Multicultural Education (1973), "The commitment to cultural pluralism must permeate all areas of the educational experience provided for prospective teachers."

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